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World Chronicle

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GUEST: **Mrs. Gertrude MONGELLA**
Secretary-General
Fourth World Conference on Women

JOURNALISTS: Bhaskar Menon, *The Times of India*
Judy Lessing, Radio New Zealand

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FOURTH WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN

GERTRUDE MONGELLA, Secretary-General of the Fourth World Conference on Women, discusses a wide range of issues related to women and the forthcoming conference. Woman have achieved some progress in a number of areas since the first women's conference was held two decades ago, but there is still much to be done. The theme of the United Nations Decade for Women -- equality, development and peace -- cannot be realized without the empowerment of women and a commitment to redress all different forms of discrimination against them. The Conference will globalize the issue of women's rights to ensure their equal participation in the development of their societies. Preparations for the Beijing conference are being organized on national, regional and international levels.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Over the last few decades, the world has witnessed global political, economic and social changes. This process has had a profound impact, both positive and negative, on women. To assess how women's lives have changed and to take steps to keep issues of concern to women high on the international agenda, the world community will convene the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China in September of 1995.

Our guest today is in a unique position to address women's concerns. She is Mrs. Gertrude Mongella, the Secretary-General of the Fourth World Conference on Women. Joining me to talk with Mrs. Mongella are Bhaskar Menon of *The Times of India* and Judy Lessing of Radio New Zealand. Mrs. Mongella, welcome to World Chronicle.

MONGELLA: Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: Madame Secretary-General, the Charter of the United Nations, the preamble, speaks of "We, the peoples of the United Nations", et cetera, not "We, the men and women", or "the females and males of the United Nations", but we seem now to be getting into a situation where we're dividing the spoils, so to speak, and we have men's issues and women's issues, children's issues, the rights of children, the Rights of the Child, and so forth. Aren't we getting a little bit too much into a sort of segregated agenda?

MONGELLA: It's not -- that's not true. I think the problem is, as the Charter says, "We the people", the men who got into position turned it, without writing it, "We, the men". And what we are trying to say is that the world is still made of men and women -- and children, because you start by being children before you become men. So we are trying just to say the truth of what the world is composed of. And we can even go further and say in most of the constitutions of each country, the majority of them say "We, the people", but in practice it's "We, the men". And this is what we are trying to articulate.

LITTLEJOHNS: But one of the documents I have here says "...conference to set women's agenda into the next century". So women are going to have a different agenda from men?

MONGELLA: We have been forced to do that, because if people had followed the Charter in all the pronouncements -- even in religion people say human beings are created equal before God, but in practice, it shows that the human being -- I mean, if

there is a God, it's a God for the men. Now, I would like to say that the United Nations, I think since 1946, did establish a Commission on the Status of Women, but from that time, women were considered as social objects. But as we moved our own, people found out that women are not just social objects to be taken care of in welfare issues. And we have moved the stage even further from conference to conference and from time to time to recognize that women are human beings who have rights and responsibilities, and whose rights have to be protected. And in looking into that, especially if you look at the three conferences concerning women, you can even find that a lot of human rights have been violated as far as women are concerned. And we cannot continue, both men and women who believe in human rights cannot continue seeing the world violating almost half of the people's rights, that's one. The other thing, if you believe in democracy, you cannot tolerate to see that the world in the majority of parliaments is represented by less than 15 per cent women. So these are principles which we all --

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean on a worldwide basis?

MONGELLA: Yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: I believe Sweden, for example, has 41 per cent.

MONGELLA: Sweden is now leading. I think that's what brings us to 10.3 per cent. But if you take out the Nordic countries, the rest, despite their level of development, are below 10, well, between 10 and 15 per cent. So that's very appalling. I mean, we are -- I was a teacher, I'm saying we are performing below pass mark.

MENON: This is the fourth conference that the UN has organized on women. Have you made any attempt to kind of tabulate the kind of progress you've made since the first conference in '75?

MONGELLA: Yes, we are making what we call an evaluation, because Beijing, the logic of Beijing is to find more action. In Nairobi we produced what is known as the Forward-looking Strategies.* It covers -- that document covers everything.

LITTLEJOHNS: What happened in Nairobi? What was that?

MONGELLA: The Nairobi World Conference, the previous one.

LITTLEJOHNS: Oh, that was the third conference?

MONGELLA: Yes, 1985. It covered all the areas, because women do cut across; as I said, they are people, so they cut across in the political, social, economic issues. So we did produce a document known as the "Forward Looking Strategies" hoping that it would be implemented by the year 2000. But in 1990, when the evaluation

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* Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000.

was made -- you can say mid-evaluation, mid-term evaluation -- we found out that the pace of implementation was very, very, very slow. But despite that --

MENON: What was the fastest -- what progress have you made? In which area would you say the most progress has been made?

MONGELLA: First of all, I would like to say a general comment that the progress which has been made, it has brought women onto the agenda. That's one progress. The other thing, the women themselves have learned to network, to lobby, to negotiate their own issues, and they're a force to reckon [with]. That's why you can find that in Rio women were able to bring to Agenda 21 a whole concept of women in the environment as the managers, and bringing out the skills and the experience women have in managing the environment. That is one success we got.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is the Summit Conference on the Environment in Rio de Janeiro.

MONGELLA: On the environment. And when we came to human rights in Vienna, the same: the energy of women made it to Vienna, where the definition of human rights was more expanded to really have a definition which covers women's rights. And now, in Cairo --

LITTLEJOHNS: The Population Conference.

MONGELLA: The Population Conference. That is a conference also which has had a time where the discussion on women's issues as the concerned population has come out more clearly, although it was very much, unfortunately, masked by people who either talked for abortion or against abortion. Both of them really overdid it to the extent that they masked the most important issues of education, of health -- you know, the health of women, of the right of women to make decisions, and the economic well-being of a woman in order even to maintain the population. But this is one of the conferences where women really showed their strength. So we say along with these conferences the women of the world have globalized their energy. This is a great success.

LITTLEJOHNS: Have done what, Mrs. Mongella?

MONGELLA: They have globalized their efforts to solve this problem of inequality or disparity between men and women. But I would like to say the other success is the governments' efforts. We cannot ignore the governments' efforts. Because from 1975 up to now you can see that governments also have been making an attempt to redress the imbalance which existed. And the other achievement which we have made is even women themselves have changed. Actually, I do say that we might be having the women of tomorrow and the men of yesterday.

MENON: But the ordinary woman in, say, Africa or south Asia, the poor woman, has her life changed over the three decades that the UN has been involved?

MONGELLA: Actually, I would say not much.

MENON: Not much.

MONGELLA: Not much. Because there are so many factors. First of all, information dissemination has not been so much in favour of the women at the grassroots level, and especially poor women. Because women -- see, poverty means you are deprived! And these women are the ones who don't have TV, they don't -- they cannot read and write, the majority of them, people don't reach them. They are not -- they don't make news. So this is a big, big problem. And in the Conference we are going to address the problem of articulating women's issues in a positive image so that it can get to the women, but at the same [time] creating the positive and right image of women. I'm glad you have asked that question, and I think the mass media has a role to play. The majority of poor women in developing countries are still deprived of the knowledge and the skills which would make them move faster, although they are still working very hard.

LESSING: Mrs. Mongella, you mentioned the Cairo Conference, the full title of which was Population and Development, and in the Forward-looking Strategies, 10 years ago, you were talking about the place of women in development. Are countries, are governments, are people realizing how important a place women have in development? That if you overlook them your country doesn't move forward?

MONGELLA: I mean, this -- everyone says so! I mean, I am very surprised, if you listen to the speeches of government leaders, they always recognize that. But one thing is I think psychological. And it is an attitude of men. And it's power. With power, when you are holding power, you cannot let it [go] easily. So I think this is the main thing. I mean, those who have power are afraid of letting the power [go], distributing the power to the women. And I think the women, this -- I keep on saying that we women should not just wait. There's no invitation to power. Never.

MENON: This is one thing that struck me, is that in all that the UN does about women, they're empowered essentially on equity issues, or the attempt is to empower them on equity issues, like getting rid of poverty; there is never any talk of women in power.

MONGELLA: But we have been talking about it for a long time. Because you can never achieve the three goals of development, peace and equality if you don't talk about decision-making. This has been discussed for a long time, and I think it didn't click, or it was intentionally avoided, but now we can no longer avoid it.

MENON: But even in simple terms. For instance, at the Cairo Conference there was a great deal of talk about abortion, as you said. And women, the whole talk was women, poor women were being empowered to undertake a procedure that is life threatening. There was no talk of empowering poor men to undertake vasectomies. It seems to me that there is a basic -- the UN process itself is so heavily dominated by men that women's concerns essentially are --

LITTLEJOHNS: Well, I think that's what Mrs. Mongella said at the start. That "We, the peoples" really meant "We, the men".

MONGELLA: "We, the men"! So, and actually you can find that even in the area of contraception, because it's risky. So it's the women -- the experiments, everything is on women. But I think the most dangerous creature is the man. Because a woman is capable of conceiving only 12 times a year, but the danger in the woman, I mean the havoc --

LITTLEJOHNS: The bull among the cows.

MONGELLA: -- the havoc a man can create is more than 12 times a year. So this -- I am glad you have asked this question. And that's why if you read the document from Cairo,* you will find that it did also state the partnership of both men and women. And this is an underlying principle which we are going to use in Beijing in the World Conference, Fourth World Conference. But even if we bring about changes, if we don't -- even women, if we make the mistake of moving along as if the world is for women, as if we are going to turn it upside down, we'll find that we are stuck. We have to keep that principle. The world is made of men and women, but there's a disparity between men and women. And when we are trying to correct it, we are not going to be doing it for the sake of just changing the men, I mean replacing the men, and women coming into the place of men. And that's why in the preparations we have tried to avoid this by bringing in the voices of the young people. We are having several meetings with the young people, and they are part of the process. And in this case we put together men, young men and young girls, so that we can have a cut-off point where we no longer, in the following generations, start talking about that inequality. But it will take time, because these children are born of us, and we do socialize them in a way which gives that disparity.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is World Chronicle. Our guest is Mrs. Gertrude Mongella, Secretary-General of the Fourth World Conference on Women. Judy Lessing.

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* The International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action.

LESSING: Mrs. Mongella, I'd like to know a bit more about how you see the Beijing Conference working out. You talked about having young men and young women, boys and girls together, but what else do you think is going to come out of Beijing, given that, you know, you have to be a bit of a crystal ball gazer?

MONGELLA: In Beijing the process is as follows: There are three levels -- the national preparations, the regional preparations, and the international preparations. And these were meant to bring in all the issues in that order so that from the reports which we've got from the evaluation at a national level and the activities at a national level, we gear to that articulation of the problems which remain. At the regional level, regional conferences will get to the specific concerns of each region. But at the same time, this process has been guided by the decision of the Commission on the Status of Women, which has identified a few areas, about ten of them. Because in Nairobi, as I said, at the World Conference we did touch on everything; but in Beijing we think it's very wise to only concentrate on a few areas which we think will make a change and therefore bring about a very, very conspicuous change. For example, poverty, eradication of poverty; education and health is another area of concern; violence against women is another concern; the use of the mass media to create a positive image of women; questions of environment....

LESSING: You're touching on some things that have already been addressed in some international conferences -- you mention environment. But questions on violence against women hardly ever come up. I mean, a lot of lip service is paid to it, right?

LITTLEJOHNS: Sexual harassment is something we hear a lot about in the UN. Have you discussed that?

MONGELLA: Actually, violence, we are not -- actually, with the Women's Conference, we are not bound only to say that we are going to discuss these issues. As I say, they cut across, women's issues cut across. So the Conference is going to discuss it from an angle which puts the women as the agenda. So you can apply the concept of women throughout -- education, and so on -- because if you take education and you don't apply it, this is what we got: that in the education systems, because women were not focused [upon], then the women were left out; or they were given education which was reinforcing them becoming subordinates instead of giving them the sciences and the technologies, the technological education which would enable them to get into the labour market. So you can see that at the Conference we target, I mean, the agenda is women, and we targeted these chosen areas so that we can take actions.

MENON: But to what extent are the issues that you've just mentioned -- poverty, education, health, violence, mass media, environment -- to what extent are these North-South issues, or will they be North-South issues at the Beijing Conference?

MONGELLA: Actually, in women -- let me tell you one thing we've discovered about women. In women sometimes the North-South does not count. This is where we even find out some of the questions we have to answer. If not in Beijing, but later, or during the Social Development Summit. For example, if you say "development", what does development mean to a woman? Because if you look at my country, it's a least developed country, but the percentage of representation of women in parliament, if that's democracy, is higher than some of the most developed countries.

LITTLEJOHNS: Is that so? In Tanzania you have --

MONGELLA: Yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: Well, really?

MONGELLA: I have the same percentage as the United States and Canada. Now, how do you explain it? When we didn't have an opportunity to go to school like the women who went to school here? So you must find another variable to explain why development, so-called development, does not really bear the same fruits to -- I mean does not make a difference between a woman who is in a developed country and a woman who's in a developing country.

LITTLEJOHNS: But these women you talk about in Tanzania, they're probably all very highly educated women; they're not peasants, are they?

MONGELLA: But globally, I would expect if you apply the concept of development, it's like, if you apply these people are more advantaged than we are, why shouldn't -- even they should understand democracy more than.... I mean, that's the idea, what it should be.

MENON: No, but at the Conference, when you discuss poverty, will it be again a repetition of the same argument we've had between North and South about the flow of financial resources?

MONGELLA: I think you cannot avoid it sometimes. Because if my mother is growing cotton, and that's the cash crop, it depends on the international price. If the international price is not fair, my mother will never get out of that poverty. So there is poverty of an individual, but there is a national poverty. If you are trapped into a nation which is poor, and the relationship of economics in the world allows that country to remain poor, you'll never get out of it.

MENON: But --

LITTLEJOHNS: Let Judy -- let Judy ask a question! [LAUGHTER] What is this, male dominance on this programme?

LESSING: No, that's all right. But there is something, I did want to just change tack just a little bit. At the Cairo Conference, the New Zealand minister who spoke said that if countries would only implement, put teeth in the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, an awful lot of the problems that that particular conference was talking about, some of which will come up at the Beijing Conference, you really wouldn't be worrying about them, because governments, people, would be concerned that women had this kind of equality in all forms of life. Now, are there no teeth in this Convention? It's been around for 15 years.

MONGELLA: It's not a matter of teeth, it's a matter of commitment.

LESSING: But aren't teeth and commitment -- don't they come together?

MONGELLA: No, they don't necessarily come together, because if you are not committed to doing a thing it can be there for years. It's that commitment. And that's what we should be looking for in Beijing. It's not a matter of just producing a document, it's a matter of really everybody working to make sure that there is a commitment. And I would use the example of the Nordic countries, because their governments are committed. You can see that there is a structural change even in the pattern of work, the pattern of social decisions they make, so that they will bring in the woman as a central figure rather than leaving her out. Otherwise, you get the situation where we are trying, in most countries, knocking -- knocking, knocking at the door where the room is full of men and we are trying to push ourselves in. In politics, that's what the majority of us do, push ourselves into an area which is considered to be male. Even when I was an ambassador, I thought that that institution was created for men, and that's why you found people saying "the wives of ambassadors". You never hear about husbands. Because it was meant to be for men.

But the other thing I'm saying is it's not automatic. I mean, the men -- the women are in society. They are so much linked to other factors. So even if you eliminate violence against women in a poor country, you are not necessarily making that woman better, because that's not the only factor. You have to go to the economic factors. And that's why I go back to the question of Mr. Menon, that you cannot just stop addressing the question of the poor nations in relationship to the development of women. For example, in the women in the -- I mean, governments in the developing countries can be committed to educate women, but where are the schools? Can they afford to educate their women? Sometimes that's also a question. They can eradicate all the disparity, and they are not educating all the men. So this, in the developing

countries there can be dual actions: one is to get these countries out of poverty, to make life worth living; and the other action is to eradicate the disparity. So all this for the women in the North is a matter of just taking the human rights and all these other things and saying, hey, we are so developed, why are we in this level? We know so much about democracy, why is our level of representation so low? But in the other countries we have also to act on the question of development, per se.

MENON: Do the women, the feminist groups in the North, see the southern argument for greater resources? When you talk to non-governmental groups in the North, do they buy this argument that there should be a greater transfer, or there should be greater equity internationally?

MONGELLA: It's so difficult to say that, because the women in the North, they are also in the same position, they don't control the words of their nations.

LESSING: It all comes down to -- you're talking about power in a country.

MONGELLA: Yes, he's talking about power games! That's what I'm saying, they are there, they can have all these other things, but are they the ones who are controlling? Are they the ones who are making decisions? This is where you find the cross-cutting issues. That's just why we are able to talk from the North to the South on these issues, because they really centre on us being women, that you can find that women in the North are not controlling, are not making decisions. So we are both saying we have to make -- we have to get to a level of decision-making. And even use the word "empowerment" carefully, because you can say empowerment, who is going to empower us?

LITTLEJOHNS: But you know, Mrs. Mongella, a lot of women in the North don't seem to want to have the power that you speak of. For example, Hillary Clinton, when she became a very prominent person politically, was slapped on by a lot of women. The Equal Rights Amendment was defeated largely because of the efforts of women who said, well, this is going to mean that we have to share bathrooms with men in America. So, women have themselves to blame to some extent.

MONGELLA: But I don't think sharing a bathroom is a matter of principle.

LITTLEJOHNS: Well, it was made a matter of principle in the ERA.

MONGELLA: I mean, that's why we have a master bedroom, so that the father and mother have their own bathroom and the children have their own bathroom. But what I'm saying, as a matter of fact, is when women do it, they think it's a problem, but how many times have men slapped each other and we've taken it for granted? Why do we expect women to accept, I mean, to think the same?

LESSING: Because we're not all the same.

MONGELLA: No, we're not the same! So if I give an opinion, she has the right, you know, to differ. Like men, they do differ on so many principles. That's why we have wars all over, and these wars are man-made. If there's any man-made issue in this world, it's war. And it's made by men because they don't agree.

LITTLEJOHNS: But if Hillary Clinton wants to assume a leadership role, don't you think she should have the support of the majority of American women?

MONGELLA: But if you go back to men and issues, I wouldn't like to really centre on an individual, because we are discussing issues which cover people who have never even heard about Hillary Clinton. They've never -- they've no word --

LITTLEJOHNS: Don't tell Hillary Clinton that!

MONGELLA: Yes! I mean, I want to say, we are discussing issues which cut across the women, they really cut across, and we do share. And this is what gives us the strength, that if we talk about values, we do understand each other; if we talk about lack of decision-making, whether you come from a developed or developing country, it's the same thing; if you talk about the low status of women, there are some nations which have very great economic power, but the status of their women is quite low.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mrs. Mongella, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of World Chronicle. Our guest has been Mrs. Gertrude Mongella, Secretary-General of the Fourth World Conference on Women. She was interviewed by Bhaskar Menon of *The Times of India* and Judy Lessing of Radio New Zealand. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of World Chronicle.

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